

THE COWARD. By HENRY NORMANBY.

An admirable description of a storm at sea and the shattering of a fond woman's idol.

WHEN Captain McPherson came on deck the things he saw were calculated to please him entirely. The ship was slipping smartly through the water, dipping gracefully into the long, slow swell. With yards squared and everything drawing she drove steadily through the heaving sea. The day was serenely beautiful, and overhead the enormous stretch of deep blue sky showed not a speck of cloud to mar its continuity.

The master complacently looked about him, noting with satisfaction the trim yards, straining canvas, taut braces and stays; inspecting with critical eye the standing rigging and all the paraphernalia of the ship's deck.

"What's she doing, Mr. Crozier?" he asked as that officer came over to the weather side of the quarter-deck, respectfully removing his pipe to reply.

"A good fourteen, sir; looks likely to hold, don't you think?"

"Afraid not," said the captain, glancing comprehensively at the cloudless blue; "there's a deal o' weather in that sky."

Mr. Crozier also glanced round, wondering if he had missed any storm indications. "Glass keeps up," he ventured, this being his first voyage with Captain McPherson.

"Glass!" growled the master. "Glass ain't no use—only tells you what the weather *is*, not what it's goin' to be. Glass or no glass, it'll blow hard before morning or I'm a sojer." So saying the worthy commander took the reading of the compass and went below.

The first mate was strongly of opinion that in the matter of weather prophecy the captain was more martial than maritime. He gave orders for the wheel to be relieved, filled his pipe, expectorated to leeward, and leaned meditatively over the weather rail. Further than eye could see the red resplendent sunshine flamed on the rolling water. The sun itself came down the Western sky, going god-like to its august repose, and the majestic ship followed it to the furthest margin of the slumbering world.

The cool, sweet evening wind swept from the out-blown sails, making a steady sustained note of its own; the wheel-chains rattled rhythmically, ropes swung to and fro, blocks creaked and spars strained; from the fore-castle came the subdued murmur of men, and the strange inscrutable note of the ocean filled in and rounded the harmony of the night.

The silence of the great deep was oppressive and the irresistible lift of the rolling seas seemed more awful, more magnificent, when accomplished unobtrusively and unaccompanied by the tumult of storm. Through the immense silence the stately ship went on her way, unceasingly climbing the smooth hills of the sea, fearing nothing, asking nothing, hoping nothing, never resting, and never growing weary, faithful and obedient, the good servant of strenuous men.

At eight o'clock Mr. Crozier set the first night watch and took charge of the deck. The wind had almost completely died away, and the ship was rolling slowly in the indolent swell. As the last stroke of the bell sounded, the two passengers came up the companion-way and began to patrol the deck on the weather side.

The ship was bound home from Sydney, and Mr. and Mrs. Paradine were starting on their wedding trip. The courtship had been dangerously brief, but hitherto there had appeared no sign of that repentance which too often succeeds the matrimonial alliance, whether entered upon with celerity or leisure. The mellifluous moon was at the full, even as that other, more corporeal and matter-of-fact luminary which was now hanging in the deep azure. Through the peace of the night went the noble vessel, and through the peace of their united lives went these two hapless souls, whispering together of the future, of happiness, of the glory of life and the beauty of the world.

At midnight there was no proof of that fickleness of the elements which the captain had predicted. The great yellow moon was lighting up the monotonous waves which came on and went past the vessel and rolled away astern in perfect silence. The sails cast huge black shadows which shifted and changed grotesquely with the ceaseless variation of the unresting deep. The ship herself seemed to have fallen asleep and dreamed on the bosom of the brilliant sea.

With the relief of the watch the captain came on deck and spoke to Mr. Crozier. "Better turn in smartly and get what rest you can," he growled; "there's bad weather ahead, any amount of it." As the chief officer had noticed that the glass was still rising, he wondered in an obscure corner of his mind whether the captain had been drinking.

While Mr. Crozier slept and dreamed of the pleasures of Portsmouth Town, the master wandered about like the spirit of Discontent; finally he gave orders that all lashings be doubled, the hatches looked to, and that the men be kept handy to shorten sail.

"The old man thinks he'll be home to the missus too soon," explained one of the men, who was promptly silenced by the cook's announcement: "You ain't sailed with our old man afore, sonny, and I *have*. When he says 'rain,' the sea comes down from the tops'ls sartin sure, and when the old man says 'gales' it's hell! You can lay to that, sonny."

This was rightly held to be evidence, and the prosecution discredited accordingly.

At 3 a.m. Mr. Crozier woke to honour a prophet in his own ship. The *Tasmanian* was lying over to a screeching clamouring wind, and

driving through the sea at a terrific speed. Moon and stars had vanished and enormous masses of inky clouds were going across the sky on some grave and sombre quest whereof the key is not ours. The wind seemed to take a wild inordinate delight in the spectacle of the yielding vessel. Sail had not been reduced and the gale roared down the concavity of the hard canvas, tore along the deck, and swept over the stern in a deafening uproar of rattling tackle and driving sea.

The captain was standing by the wheel, and as the chief officer came up to him he shouted, "More than she can stand—it's going to blow harder—snug her down," and Mr. Crozier passed on the order, "Lay aloft and close reef!" Away went the men into the giddy insecurity of flying ropes and swinging spars, and presently the *Tasmanian* began to make better weather of it.

Under shortened sail the straining ship drove through the rising sea, her monstrous lifts and plunges shaking her to the minutest bolt and screw. Her struggles were magnificent and her courage sublime. As the wind went on increasing the seas began to come aboard, and soon immense volumes of water were pouring over her. The forecastle was so thoroughly flooded that the relieved watch said they would go on deck to get dry.

There was a majestic harmony in the uproar, everything contributed to it, everything movable demonstrated the properties of motion, the pots and pans banged and rattled in the galley, the oil-lamps swung wildly to and fro, things broke adrift and rolled about the deck, and as the sea went on rising the ship herself became possessed of a frightful energy, climbing the giant waves with monstrous rushes and falling into the abysmal hollows with a velocity that stopped the breath.

The relieved watch tumbled up from below, each man preferring to "see himself drown." The effect of the weather on the men was diverse; one waxed truculent and offered to fight any man aboard the ship for a "quid," another waxed lachrymose and regretted his past misdeeds, a third became abased and confided to his fellows the melancholy fact that he was a man what had done wrong to his parents, a fourth thought there might be something in religion after all, blast him! while he whose pipe was washed into the lee scupper cursed his luck in that he had just filled it with tobacco. As Mr. Crozier fought his way through the cataracts of incoming water he reflected bitterly on the fact that the glass had risen a bit more.

Above the clamour of the ship sounded the steady note of the gale, which was constantly broken in upon by the battering of compact masses of water falling on the deck. The increasing sea appeared to grow angry at the unwarrantable opposition of the ship which hurled back the onrushing waves, rode over and down them, shaking herself free of their gleaming teeth, tearing and mangling their bodies as it drove through them.

"Starboard!" shouted Mr. Crozier to the men at the wheel, as a tremendous roaring hill rose out of the ocean and swept towards the ship. The captain watched it critically as it mounted the forecastle and thundered into the waist.

The ship was staggered at the unexpected onslaught, and rose to it

dubiously, while every man looked hurriedly to windward to see if another of like magnitude were following in the evil way of the first. The scuppers, meanwhile, were spouting tons of foaming water, and the ship, recovering herself, made a furious rush forward, burying herself to the lower yards in seething spray. Not a drop of rain had fallen, although the sky was thick with pitch-black clouds.

The two passengers were awakened by the advent of the storm, and the husband hurried on deck to ascertain the state of affairs. He returned even more hurriedly, and, having been advised by the captain to remain below, set himself to the task of allaying the fears of his wife.

"The captain says there isn't any danger," he began cheerfully, to which Mrs. Paradine answered, "Ah, that was just his kindness—there is always danger at sea."

"Oh, yes—of course," he replied somewhat blankly; "but you mustn't be frightened, you know."

"I don't think I am; why *should* I be, with you here?" she asked.

"Of course not; but, you know, it looks rather awful up there."

"It would be terrible if you were not with me," she admitted; "but as it is, well—it's bad weather at sea, that's all."

When the ship filled her decks and was hove down on her beam-ends Mr. Paradine made an attempt to leave the cabin to see what had happened, but everything was battened down and made fast, so that they had perforce to remain below. The inclination of the ship and the uproar of wind and sea drove the blood from his face, and the amazed wife saw him grow white with fear. He tried vainly to hide his dismay, but presently became faint with terror, and the wife sought to comfort him, feigning an anxiety she did not feel, so that his own pusillanimity might appear less culpable.

The cold grey dawn showed the storm-swept sea still thundering against the ship, the wind raving, shrieking, and howling through the rigging, and the port watch turning out, cursing the hour they were born. When day broke the scene was stupendous. The wind had hauled a point or two, and a huge cross-sea was running—a wild, white confusion of wave and wind. The ship, with nothing set but her lower topsails, was rolling rails under—a poor, dismantled, dejected thing, worried, harassed, and driven by the exacting sea, flying, pitching, floundering about, wearying at length of the long, unequal fight, but patient still, still obedient and of exceeding charity.

All through the day the gale went on increasing; the sea grew heavier, the captain became morose. He never left the deck, but stood, hour after hour, gazing to windward, a dreary, dripping, lonely object, to whom fear was utterly unknown. He made frequent inquiry as to the passengers, and on being informed that the wife was very brave, said, "Poor thing, poor thing!—I'm glad she has her husband to comfort her."

The night came as a relief, the darkness shutting out to a great extent the horrors of the culminating gale. Only the near seas could be distinguished, and the plight of the stricken ship was less apparent, if more real.

Through those long and bitter hours the courageous wife endeavoured

to cheer her craven husband. She never for a moment despised him, but was glad that it was hers to help him and supremely glad to think that if, at the end, they were to be lost they would go down together in the wild sea and perish clasped in each other's arms.

Greater and more terrible than the storm of howling wind and blinding sea was the tempest of fear in that man's heart. It entirely dominated him, and in a few hours brought him to an abject, contemptible misery and impotent despair. He trembled at every stroke of the hammering waves, cowered at the shrieking wind, and gazed aghast at the enormous inclination of the ship.

At midnight Mr. Crozier reported the loss of two boats and feared some uncomplimentary criticism; but the captain merely muttered "Poor thing, poor thing!" and the chief officer wondered what the "old man" meant. The master, holding on to a shroud, unweariedly watched the compass and the windward ocean; he only spoke to give orders, and all attempts to induce him to leave the deck were futile. When his officers pressed him he grew angry.

With the breaking of the second dawn came the abandonment of hope of saving the *Tasmanian*. That sorely tried ship was staggering under the weight of boarding seas; time after time she was unable to rise, and tremendous hills of rolling water came over her, sweeping her fore and aft. Two men were lashed to the wheel, which was relieved every hour. The forecastle was full of water, the cabins were flooded, everything movable on deck had been washed away. Only one boat remained. The carpenter reported three feet of water in the well—gaining fast.

During the forenoon watch it became evident that the ship was beginning to break up, and distress signals were hoisted. Captain McPherson continually searched the whole horizon with his glasses, but nothing came into the field thereof but white hills of tumbling water. The sea had accommodated itself to the set of the wind and was now running in gigantic ridges, topped with seething, snow-white crests. It was impossible to keep the passengers ignorant as to the state of affairs, and Mr. Crozier made the grave announcement that the ship was sinking.

The man cried out in an extravagance of terror, which the brave woman sought in vain to assuage. His sole thought was for his own safety, and he even lamented the occasion which had brought him this mischance.

At daybreak the *Tasmanian* was fast settling down, and all hands were called on deck and ordered to their stations. As the hapless couple came up the companion-way Captain McPherson went forward and gave the girl his hand.

"I'm sorry I cannot give you a better welcome," he said; "but don't be afraid—we shall come through all right."

The wretched man cried out, "Oh, captain, save me! Save me!" but the master turned away, and, leaving them in charge of Mr. Crozier, called all hands aft.

"My lads," said he, "you see how things are—the ship's sinking and there's one boat left—it will carry a dozen, and there are twenty-eight of

us—Port! Now I want volunteers to stand by the ship and me—Steady!—some of us *must* stop. Now, who are willing?"

Instantly every man on board, with the exception of James Paradine, Gentleman, raised a hand to signify his readiness.

"That's right—you're men," the captain went on, "and a credit to the ship—Starboard! I thank you, but I don't want all of you. Mr. Crozier, you must take charge of the boat—no, I insist—the passengers and you make three; nine more can go—Hard a-port! How many of you are married?" Twelve hands went up, but no officer raised his. "Come, Mr. Cornford, you're married, aren't you?" asked the captain.

"I stay with you, sir," replied the second mate.

"Very well," said the master. "Mr. Froy, you're married?"

"Yes, sir; but I stay—let the men go."

"Very well," again said the master—"Port a bit!—but I don't—look out all—hold tight!" and over the quarter came a tremendous sea which almost ended the scene forthwith; but the vessel rose once more, and the captain went on, "I don't want you all—let the nine youngest married men go in the boat. The rest stay with me."

Preparations for lowering the boat were quickly made; the men who had charge of it were in their places; and Mr. Crozier asked that the passengers be handed down. Everything was in readiness, a favourable opportunity being awaited in which to transfer the lady. She and her husband were standing together—the woman calm, self-reliant, and fearless; the man half-demented with terror.

As the vessel rolled down and buried her lee rails, the men brought the boat close; Mr. Crozier cried, "Now—quick!" and the captain thrust the wife forward; but before he could hand her over to the waiting men and before anyone could put forth a hand to stop him, the husband stepped in front of her and jumped, a falling wave carried the boat away from the ship, and the coward disappeared in the avenging sea. For an instant he reappeared, swept on the crest of a thundering roller, raised his arms wildly in a mute appeal, then vanished for ever.

At the same moment came a loud shout, "Sail ho!"

UNCONVINCING PHILOSOPHY.

The professors keep explaining that the richest men are those
Who possess the deepest knowledge and are free from petty woes;
Much we hear of tainted money and the heartaches that it brings
To its pitiful possessors, the perturbed financial kings.
Oh, such logic is delightful and such reasoning profound,
But cash is still a rather handy thing to have around.

He that works from early morning till the shadows fall at night,
She that sews with aching fingers till her cheeks are thin and white,
May console themselves with saying, as men have since Adam's fall,
That the rich are far from happy and that money is not all!
But the man of wealth is doubtful, for he probably has found
That cash is still a rather handy thing to have around.